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# Implementing a Holistic Reading Series In First Grade: Experiences With A Conversation Group

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A local school district has adopted a reading series which is described by the series' authors as a whole language approach (Booth, 1984). In comparison to the three previously adopted reading series (Lippincott, Open Court, and American Book), this adoption decision represents a dramatic philosophical and instructional shift. This decision also represents an attempt to mandate holistic literature-based instruction, rather than to let it emerge as a grassroots, teacher-initiated change, which is considered by Goodman (1986) to be a more successful way to implement whole language. The adoption committee — spending the better part of a year reading and studying together — represented less than five percent of the district's elementary teachers. Nearly one third of the elementary schools did not have teacher representatives on the adoption committee. Ninety-five percent of the teachers, then, had only one summer to prepare to implement a holistic reading program.

To be successful, change of this nature must address the issue of the meaning of the change for participants (Fullan, 1993; Maeroff, 1988; Marris, 1975). Almost two decades ago Marris (1975) suggested that new experiences are always

initially reacted to in the context of some "familiar, reliable construction of reality" (p. 22) in which people must be able to attach personal meaning to the experiences regardless of how meaningful they might be to others. Marris went on to state that any innovation "cannot be assimilated unless its meaning is shared" (p. 121).

Since so many teachers who were expected to implement the whole language series had not been direct participants in the decision making process, it seemed important to establish a dialogue with a group to understand the impact of such a mandated change. During the first year of implementation, a group of 18 first grade teachers, who had not been involved in the adoption decision and expressed concerns about the change, were drawn together to form a conversation group. The remainder of this article addresses the concerns of those teachers about the implementation of a holistic literature-based reading series, and in many respects whole language.

## The conversation group

The 18 teachers in the conversation group had teaching experience ranging from 2-21 years. Four teachers were in their first year as first grade teachers. Three pairs of teachers were in their first year of team teaching. Their schools represented all socioeconomic levels. As a part of the conversation group, each teacher agreed to meet bimonthly during the first semester and monthly during the second semester to discuss the changes they were observing in themselves and their progress in implementing the new series and whole language. At monthly meetings, which were audiotaped, I tried to provide support for the teachers' concerns. The teachers also kept journals focused on their personal concerns.

At the onset of the conversation group, the predisposition of each teacher to the adoption and to whole language

was determined through an instructional autobiography. Of the 18 teachers, only two were strongly opposed to the change. The remaining teachers represented a range of attitudes, from strongly in favor of the reading series and whole language to accepting the change as something beyond one's control. One factor did bind the group of teachers — they had all taught skills-based reading, in some form, for at least two years.

Slightly more than half of the group, or 10 teachers, already had begun to include more literature in their classrooms prior to the implementation because they felt that enjoyment was lacking in the skills-based series. The use of literature took the form of reading aloud to children at least once a day, a short sustained silent reading time of 10-15 minutes, and the frequent use of Big Books in shared group experiences. The Big Books, however, were primarily used for another form of reading aloud and for enjoyment, but not to support instruction directly. For many of these teachers, adding literature to their language arts program was difficult due to a shortage of resources in their schools, especially multiple copies of books, Big Books and predictable materials.

The remaining eight teachers had been satisfied with the previous basal series. They believed that their children were learning to read in a manner that they had come to expect. The sequence of the skills-based basals was familiar and most of the children progressed as the teachers expected, with benchmarks of achievement that were familiar. From the teachers' perspective, there was a certain sense of security that skills were "covered," and that most children had learned to read using the skills-oriented basals. These eight teachers read aloud sometimes, but not consistently. In the past, children in these classes had not been encouraged to read real books as frequently as children in the other 10 classrooms.

## The teacher's manual

**Format and content**. The entire group expressed concern about the format of the holistic teacher's manual, which was dramatically different from the skills-based series. Regardless of predisposition, each of the 18 teachers found the difference with the format and content of the manual to be an initial concern. The front portion of each manual contained a number of pages devoted to general philosophy and techniques that support the reading program and whole language. The individual lesson plans did not specifically integrate these techniques, but rather seemed to assume that the teacher would be knowledgeable enough to select activities appropriately to fit the content of the lesson and the developmental level of the learners. Thus, the teachers were confronted, early on, with making many new instructional decisions.

**Decision making**. These teachers were not used to making the types of decisions about lesson components that the new series expected of them. Their experiences with the skills-based manuals had been dramatically different, even to the point of being scripted for their talk with children about a story. It became very apparent that the immediacy of teaching the new series made it quite difficult for the teachers to step back from the materials long enough to determine effective ways for them to make decisions for children.

**Skill development**. The new teacher's manual presented skill development in a very general manner, not at all like the scope and sequence of the skills-based series that the teachers had previously used. It seemed to be an issue of mentioning vs. scripting. The new series mentioned some choices for activities, without elaboration for teachers who might be new at holistic instruction. The skills-based series had provided scripts and while most of the teachers did not want scripts, they certainly felt like they needed more than the mentioning of an idea.

It was also observed that, because of the highly sequenced and detailed format of the skills-based series, these teachers did not seem to have a sense of how to systematically go through the first grade books in the new series to determine the scope and sequence of skills. In previous implementations — there had been three in the past 15 years — the organization and language of each text had been similar enough that the teachers became familiar with it by teaching the lessons. They had not felt the need to analyze the previous series, since an adequate number of familiar benchmarks were readily apparent.

The new series, however, was different. Familiar aspects of the skills-based series, such as a core vocabulary list that builds from story to story, were not present and the teachers did not realize that initially. When we completed a hand tabulation of word use frequency, almost no repetition was found in the first three books (equivalent to preprimers). The skills-based series had always controlled the introduction of words and provided practice through stories and worksheets. After tabulating frequencies, teachers felt they could then explain to themselves and others why many students did not seem to be making progress in developing a core sight vocabulary. The conversation group decided to trace other skills so that they could teach themselves about the organization of the new reading series and become more able to detect areas where they would need to make decisions differently.

**Phonics.** Phonics was the major area of concern for skill development and an issue that was difficult for the group to resolve entirely. The teachers discovered that the sequence of phonics skills in the new series did not seem to be organized or presented in a manner that they readily understood. They felt that the new series did not provide much support to children who were struggling with concept of word in print and letter/sound relationships. Here, again, all of the teachers in

the group seemed to be on equal footing. The teachers who had supplemented with literature had still relied on the skills-based series to teach children the phonics skills required. All of the teachers in the conversation group had to reexamine their beliefs about the development of knowledge of words and letter/sound relationships. They taught each other what they had come to know about developmental spelling stages and techniques that they knew for supplementing children's word knowledge. The techniques they used, for the most part, kept word knowledge separated from connected text, but that was consistent with their skills-based background. I shared professional readings with the teachers to challenge their thinking, but left the details of the issues until they had more experience with their children for us to build on. I wanted them to discover the children who were learning sight words and generalizing letter/sound relationships from those words, because we could use these children to teach ourselves about strategies for supporting the development of phonics knowledge.

**Reading stories.** Another skill area that caused great concern for these teachers was the reading of stories. In the skills-based series, stories had been read orally in small ability groups and discussion could be guided by the script of questions and answers in the teacher's manual. The new manual merely encouraged teachers to read the story aloud to children first, then have children chorally read until the text was familiar. The new manual also gave similar suggestions from story to story and the teachers soon felt that they were being far too repetitious to keep children's interest.

Here is where the teachers who had begun adding literature to their programs responded somewhat differently from those teachers who had been almost entirely skills-based. The teachers who had supplemented with literature found it easier to think of various ways to engage children in a story.

They seemed more comfortable with the literature, to the point of being playful with the stories. These teachers were better able to generalize the use of ideas they had received from workshops and professional readings in their work with children. Their predisposition to literature was an asset to them and they were able to support and encourage the other teachers in the group.

## Whole group instruction

As the teachers were able to address their concerns with the new teacher's manual, a second broad concern emerged. The series encouraged teachers to provide most instruction in a whole group setting, a stark contrast to the ability groups most frequently used in skills-based instruction. The new manual offered general whole language philosophy, but these teachers, many with long histories of teaching with ability groups, found it difficult to believe that reading stories primarily through whole group techniques could reach their children. As a group, they were not prepared for this shift. While they had always read aloud to their entire class, they had not really thought of it as instruction and, consequently, did not think they knew instructional strategies for whole group reading instruction. They knew behavior and lesson management strategies, but did they know instructional strategies for reading with a group of diverse learners? Of particular concern was how they would know if they were meeting the needs of the obvious range of readers that they had observed in their classrooms.

After this concern surfaced in the conversation group, I encouraged the teachers to tape record themselves during some of their whole group reading activities, then listen to their interactions with children. What patterns of response did they notice? Did they respond to all children in a similar manner? In an effort to reduce their anxiety about recording

themselves, they were not required to share the recordings with anyone. Some of the teachers who had been supplementing their programs with literature were surprised to find that they were responding differently to children during story reading. They found that they did not single out children who lacked confidence. They cued children to help them be successful in responding. They encouraged anticipation of events and accepted group responses. They also found that they modeled word identification strategies and included responses of more advanced children as a way of sharing information about reading.

As teachers were willing to share these insights from the audio taping, they were also encouraged to share their decision making processes that others might find helpful. Decision making was difficult for them to talk about. They seemed to lack the language to describe their decision making processes, as well as the knowledge of whole language philosophy that might help them explain such processes to themselves and others. At this point, the conversation group found it helpful to break up into smaller literature study groups to read and discuss a number of articles and portions of books that described emergent reading and holistic strategies. The readings in the study groups allowed the teachers to focus on someone beside themselves as they wrestled with new concepts. As they became able to use themselves as examples, we moved away from reading materials and back to their lived experience for our conversation material.

## Personal concerns

**Feeling confident and competent.** One of the major differences that seemed to separate the teachers in this conversation group over the entire year were their feelings of confidence and competence in teaching the new reading series. Those who had been able to risk already, and had

into using more literature in their classrooms before the change to the new reading series seemed more confident initially. Their talk in the conversation groups was more positive toward the change and they encouraged others in the group to be patient. Without verbalizing it explicitly, they seemed aware that the time they had spent in trying things out on their own was a good learning experience. The conversation group did provide the support that several teachers needed to be able to allow themselves to accept frustration and uncertainty as normal feelings in the midst of change. One technique that we used in the conversation group, the personal tape recording, proved to be quite a confidence builder for a number of teachers. When they heard themselves talking with children, no one else needed to tell them that they were making progress in using literature effectively.

As I mentioned at the beginning, three pairs of the teachers were in teams for the first time. Two of the teams were working very well; one team, however, was not proving to be beneficial to either of the teachers. For the two teams that were working well, the addition of the daily collaboration significantly enhanced the feelings of confidence expressed in the group. Another area in which I noticed a difference in confidence was for teachers who were working in high and low socioeconomic (SES) schools. Teachers in high SES schools felt pressure from parents with traditional views of instruction. These parents expressed concerns about changes in grouping patterns and phonics instruction. Concerns about phonics instruction caused teachers to question their personal knowledge of phonics in a whole language context. In contrast, teachers at the low SES schools felt a lack of confidence that seemed to stem from a combination of children with less experience in written language and lack of knowledge about strategies to use holistically in developing concepts about words and print over time.

**Impact of experience.** For members of this conversation group, years of experience in teaching did not appear to be a factor related to sense of self, feelings of adequacy, or level of skill conveyed through our discussions. Rather, willingness to risk and try something new seemed more closely related to positive verbalizations in the group. Conversely, years of experience in teaching first grade did seem to be a factor related to concerns expressed in the group. The four teachers who were new to first grade lacked the background of experience with this age group to judge children's progress in reading. New first grade teachers asked more questions than any other identifiable group during our conversations and were quick to defer to others that they considered more knowledgeable about the age group.

## Are conversation groups worthwhile?

After spending the first year with the teachers I realized that, in responding to their concerns, the conversation group served several very important functions for change and growth. The conversation group helped the teachers 1) learn to watch and respond to children differently, 2) to understand that the nature of learning for children is whole to part, rather than part to whole, and 3) to move toward teaching as an intellectual pursuit — as it should be — by reading and studying together. These functions are consistent with the desired outcomes suggested by whole language advocates (Goodman, 1986), experts in change processes (Fullan, 1993), and teacher empowerment advocates (Maeroff, 1988).

**Learning to watch children.** While the teachers had worked in the skills-based series they assumed that the worksheets and book tests told them most of what they needed to know about children's progress. The format of the new reading series and whole group instruction immediately made the teachers feel uncomfortable about judging student progress. They came to discover that one of the major

differences between skills-based and holistic teaching is emphasis on children. They had not learned to watch children closely in their skills-based work and, consequently, made decisions more as a result of what the teacher's manual suggested than what children's behavior suggested.

Through the concerns they expressed for learning to work with the new series, the conversation group was able to refocus concern on what the children's behaviors told teachers. First the teachers had to understand how the new series was organized. Then, using their overall sense of the series, the teachers could turn their attention to the specifics of what the children were doing. Until they understood the series, they were unable to understand the significance of what children said and did. Learning to watch children was very slow to come, especially for the teachers who had not begun to supplement with literature before the new series was adopted.

**Whole to part vs. part to whole**. As the teachers began to see how watching children could teach them about what to do next in their classrooms, they also began to verbalize examples that showed how children learned from whole to part and not vice versa. This realization came from many of our discussions on word knowledge and the reading of stories. The whole to part philosophy caused these teachers to redefine their ideas about what they had always called merely "memorization." Their understanding was by no means complete, but they did challenge their long held beliefs about constantly needing to break things down in little pieces for children before learning could take place.

**Study groups**. Probably the most significant and powerful part of the year was spent together in the study groups. When teachers come together to talk concretely about relevant theories and practice that are of concern to them, they teach themselves and each other things that no transmission

model could ever hope to teach. Addressing their concerns, when the concerns became important, was the key to the study groups. These teachers also came away with a new understanding and appreciation for their own abilities and those of their colleagues to be the "experts." Many of them, but not all, came to see how powerful the social side of learning is for adults, and not just for children.

## Reflections

Personal meaning is essential to the change process. The teachers in this conversation group clearly illustrated the importance of the development of personal meaning, if instructional, as well as personal, change is to be effective and sustained. As Fullan (1993) suggests, materials and practices can be impacted through a mandated change, but until one finds personal meaning in the philosophy of a mandated change, the change will not be complete. In addition, the conversation group enabled teachers to assimilate the change through the sharing of the implementation experience.

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